

Community Assistantship Program

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Overcoming Barriers, Celebrating Successes, Municipal Sustainability Efforts in Northwest Minnesota

Prepared in partnership with
Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs)

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this assessment was to learn about sustainable initiatives from communities in Northwest Minnesota. The communities involved in this assessment were Bagley, Bemidji, and Park Rapids. The goal of this assessment was to gain perspective from key stakeholders in Northwest Minnesota, including city staff and local champions on sustainability issues. This assessment included identifying the current practices, current and future opportunities, and barriers pertaining to sustainability in these communities. In addition to identifying and assessing these current practices, barriers, and opportunities, this assessment also provided the chance to educate on sustainability. The stakeholder interviews presented great opportunities to learn from community members, specifically city staff and local champions.

Partnering on this assessment was Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs). CERTs advances the adoption of renewable energy and energy efficiency projects in communities across Minnesota by helping people learn, connect, and act. The framework used for the assessment was GreenStep Cities. GreenStep Cities is a voluntary challenge, assistance and recognition program to help cities achieve their sustainability goals through implementation of 28 best practices. Each best practice can be implemented by completing one or more specific actions from a list of four to eight actions. These actions are tailored to all Minnesota cities, focus on cost savings and energy use reduction, and encourage innovation. The program is administered by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA).

There are a wide variety of sustainable practices being implemented within the communities of Bagley, Bemidji, and Park Rapids. The city of Bagley has promoted sustainability in many areas including protection of lakeshore and water quality, and requiring energy efficient streetlights in future projects. Bemidji has promoted sustainability in many areas including ongoing efforts to upgrade bike trails and bike lanes, and expansion of local food production in partnership with Bemidji Schools. Park Rapids has

promoted sustainability by organizing community tree planting initiatives and implementing a set of Shoreland Overlay District zoning ordinances. The most common practices between these cities focused on development of parks and trails, and protection of water quality.

There were several themes that emerged from stakeholder interviews. One of the themes was centered on budget constraints as a significant barrier to implementing sustainable practices. All the communities are very open to implementing sustainable practices, but many times the financial challenges are overwhelming. Moreover city staffs have numerous responsibilities, and environmental sustainability is not always at the forefront of those responsibilities. Another theme across several interviews was the strong sense of independence by these communities. The main barrier to sustainability in Northwest Minnesota is that rural communities in this region lack staff capacity and financial resources to implement additional sustainable practices. Those factors have led to a self-reliant approach among rural Minnesota cities.

Bagley

The City of Bagley is located in Clearwater County in Northwestern Minnesota, just off of U.S. Highway 2. Bagley is the county seat for Clearwater County. Bagley is approximately 90 miles south of Canadian border and approximately 200 miles NW of the Twin Cities. Bagley has a population of 1,392 residents. Located within the city limits is beautiful Lake Lomond.

Currently Happening

The city of Bagley, like other small communities, is faced with a number of barriers in implementing sustainable practices. These barriers include; lack of financial resources, lack of staff capacity, lack of community support for sustainability issues, and complexities of long-term impact versus short-term costs of implementing sustainable practices. That being said, the city has taken several measures to improve sustainability in Bagley. In 2003 the city of Bagley annexed the properties along Lomond Drive to ensure protection of water quality. This annexation required property owners to follow a set of more comprehensive city ordinances. This progress is a part of GreenSteps Practice 19: Surface Water Quality.

Over the past 25 years several million dollars have been allocated to update Bagley's septic systems. Approximately 2.5 million dollars was acquired through bonding in 1997 and 1998 with another approximately 1.5 million acquired from 1999 through 2004. These funds went to infrastructure upgrades including lagoon system upgrades, lift stations, sewer and water line, and a variety of other upgrades city infrastructure. In addition to the above, during the years 2004 and 2005 over one million dollars was spent on building a new water treatment plant. The infrastructure upgrades were implemented to ensure protection of water quality. Additionally, the projects were completed with the capacity to handle Bagley's population being twice what it is presently.

Parks and recreation areas are a top priority for the city of Bagley. They allocate between five and ten thousand dollars every year for parks and recreation improvements. A recent project involved a new ball field at the park and also improvements to the campground area. The work being done connects to Practice 18: Parks and Trails from the GreenSteps framework.

Current and Future Opportunities

The Bagley city staff has planned several future projects to improve long-term sustainability. They have authorized that all future street renovation projects include installation of LED streetlights. Bagley's commitment to street lighting improvements fits into GreenSteps Practice 19: Efficient Street Lighting.

The city is also anticipating a project involving renovation of the city's sewer lines. The project will essentially involve re-lining the city's sewer lines. The city is very aware of its quality water supply and any type of project that protects its ground water will be a priority. Parks are an ongoing opportunity for Bagley, as they intentionally allocate funds every year to make improvements.

Current and Future Barriers

The most significant barriers facing the city of Bagley are staffing capacity and limited financial resources. Many rural communities in Minnesota face these same challenges. A theme from the interviews identified the difficulty for city staff to balance sustainability and financial responsibility in future projects. An example of this in Bagley involved the decision-making process to improve street lights in the city. The city staff had been monitoring the cost of LED lights and decided that the cost of LED lights had become affordable and that this would promote sustainability while also being financially sensible. An additional theme from the interviews identified a lack of staff capacity in regards to accessing grants for implementing sustainable practices.

Bemidji

The City of Bemidji is located in Beltrami County in Northwestern Minnesota. Bemidji is approximately 70 miles south of Canadian border and approximately 200 miles NW of the Twin Cities. Bemidji has a population of 13,431 residents. It is the county seat for Beltrami County and is known as the First city on the Mississippi. The word Bemidji is derived from an Ojibwa word meaning “a lake with crossing waters”.

Currently Happening

Bemidji has already joined the GreenSteps initiative, so the focus for this assessment was to supplement what was already accomplished. There were numerous contacts made in Bemidji, thus allowing access to a variety of perspectives on certain topics. Community members, who are engaged in a wide range of sustainable issues, provided valuable insight. The interviews included the city engineer, city manager, city planner, the Bemidji State University Sustainability Coordinator, and the MN GreenCorp member from Bemidji.

The interviews identified several priorities concerning sustainability in Bemidji. At the city level, parks are a top priority. Bemidji has an abundance of parks to offer residents and tourists. This significance placed on parks was a theme that remained evident throughout this assessment. Parks are an important issue for Minnesota overall, as they provide people with the opportunity to experience the benefits of protecting natural resources. Additionally, renovation opportunities of multi-use trails are at the forefront of Bemidji’s sustainability efforts. The trails and bike lanes on many Bemidji streets offer countless opportunities for bikers from Bemidji, and other individuals visiting the region. An additional component that the city is very committed to is tree planting opportunities. There are ordinances for all commercial re-development projects.

The city of Bemidji is working on improving energy efficiency in its buildings. The Sanford Center, which opened in October of 2010, was built to B3 building benchmarking standards. Additionally the city has had RETAP reports conducted on 5 city buildings. These actions are included in Practice 1: Efficient Existing Public Buildings, from GreenSteps. The energy efficiency and benchmarking progress connects to Practice 24: Benchmarks and Community Engagement. There have also been sustainable measures implemented in Bemidji's public utilities. Some of the recent improvements have been upgrades to the city's Wastewater Treatment Facility and lighting efficiencies in the Public Works Building.

Bemidji has made infrastructure upgrades regarding traffic lighting, specifically coordination of traffic signals and signal timing, and also replacing signals with more efficient LED's. These actions are incorporated into Practice 4: Efficient Building and Street Lighting from GreenSteps. Another action the city focuses on is street sweeping, this is vital to preventing multiple forms of pollution. In addition to those improvements to Bemidji Streets there are efforts being made on a Complete Streets Policy, which involves connecting streets and trails. As a part of those actions there is also ongoing efforts to design and construct traffic areas that are more bicycle and pedestrian friendly. These actions are elements of Practice 11: Complete Green Streets, from GreenSteps framework.

The city of Bemidji and the Sustainability Committee work together to implement various practices from the GreenSteps initiative, the most recent work has involved re-establishing a curbside recycling program. Curbside recycling was originally established in Bemidji in 1997 and lasted until 2007. The program was eliminated after ten years due to budget constraints. The goal is that after a five year absence, Bemidji will once again have a curbside recycling program.

Extensive work is being done in the Bemidji area, regarding local food production. Headwaters Foods consortium is a network of local farmers who grow fresh produce in the area. Cheryl Krystosek

from Headwaters Foods has been working with Bemidji School District 31 Food Services coordinator to organize a Farm2School initiative that delivers local organically grown produce to schools. Cheryl has been working with Bemidji Schools for approximately 2 years. She is also working with Dining Services at Bemidji State University to implement a similar program. Cheryl's role as local champion has been a key to expanding opportunities with local food production. This directly relates to Practice 27: Local Food in overall strengthening and expanding the quality of local food production.

Bemidji State University is taking an active approach in sustainability issues on campus. The sustainability efforts at BSU cover a wide variety of issues. Recent projects include renovations to athletic facilities, upgrading the lighting in the basketball gymnasium and improving energy efficiency in multiple ways in the fitness center. Moreover they have re-established native habitat by putting in a buffer zone between academic buildings and the shoreline along the west side of Lake Bemidji. In addition to the above, they have renovated on-campus housing for BSU Honor Students. This renovation of the Laurel House is being done with energy efficiency and sustainability at the forefront of the design.

Current and Future Opportunities

The city staff in Bemidji made it clear that future opportunities for energy efficiency and sustainable practices will remain a top priority. Specifically, multi-modal trails will continue to present opportunities in Bemidji. The same is true with opportunities to improve Bemidji's city parks. A theme from the interviews focused on future opportunities in renovating buildings to make them more energy efficient. There are also creative opportunities to construct multi-use buildings and multi-use districts in the city's future.

Bemidji city staff identified challenges that accompany implementation of ordinances. Furthermore they are very aware of the financial complications that residents face regarding building and yard up-keep. Ideally all residents would have the financial means to appropriately manage their buildings and yards.

A great opportunity for shaping the future of sustainability in Bemidji will be the design of a Comprehensive Land Use Plan that will begin with a community kick-off during September 13th through September 15th. There is a great opportunity for the Bemidji Sustainability Committee to be involved in the strategic process. The goal will be to incorporate pieces of the GreenSteps framework into the Comprehensive Plan. This process will fit into GreenSteps Practice 6: Comprehensive Plan and Implementation. Other opportunities in sustainability in Bemidji involve areas of Practice 26: Renewable Energy and Practice 28: Business Synergies. These have been identified as areas of GreenSteps that present unique opportunities.

Current and Future Barriers

The city of Bemidji faces a significant barrier regarding financial capabilities for implementing efficient and sustainable practices. The city staff faces challenges in implementing these practices, while representing a multitude of community perspectives. There are community members who focus on the long-term impact and those who focus on the short-term costs. The key is educating community members on the positive impact overall in protecting natural resources, from both the environmentally sustainable and economic perspectives.

Park Rapids

The City of Park Rapids is located in Hubbard County and is the County Seat. Park Rapids is approximately 110 miles south of Canadian border and approximately 170 miles NW of the Twin Cities. Park Rapids has a population of 3,709 residents. The Heartland Trail is approximately 50 miles long and extends from Park Rapids to Cass Lake. Park Rapids is the city closest to the Headwaters of the Mississippi River at Itasca State Park. There are approximately 400 lakes within a 25-mile radius of Park Rapids.

Currently Happening

There are a variety of sustainable and efficient practices being implemented in the city of Park Rapids. The interviews with city staff exhibited their awareness and openness to implementing sustainable practices. They showed their concern regarding the short-term financial implications that accompany implementing new practices.

Park Rapids has focused on improving energy efficiency in commercial buildings and residences. Furthermore they have promoted available grant opportunities in energy efficiency via the city website. The city partnered with Johnson Controls to conduct energy audits in 5 public buildings. Additionally Minnesota Power worked with private establishments and private residences to conduct energy audits on approximately 65 buildings in Park Rapids.

In addition to the above the city of Park Rapids is encouraging community members to take advantage of low interest loans available to businesses for energy efficiency improvements. Improvements such as the purchase of energy efficient furnaces, insulation, lighting and the like potentially qualify. Funding for this is provided by grants from DEED and Minnesota Power. The city staff identified that past energy efficiency audits were done on public buildings, and also many

businesses in downtown Park Rapids. This energy efficiency opportunity is a notable opportunity to improve future sustainability.

In regards to other areas of sustainability the city has adopted Individual Sewage and Septic System requirements. These adopted requirements are consistent with Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Subsurface Sewage Treatments Systems Program (SSTS). The city also requires that the City Septic Inspector inspect any recently installed systems. These are incorporated into Practice 21: Septic Systems in the GreenSteps framework.

Current and Future Opportunities

The city of Park Rapids is a member of the Tree City USA initiative, and has organized planting events since the 1980's. The city received a \$4,000 grant from MNDOT for tree replacement along TH34 and Highway 71. The Urban Forestry Committee and Park Rapids Rotary partnered to sponsor a Tree Planting Program in spring 2012 to cover damages from a 2011 storm. Due to the success of previous projects there is potential for similar programs in the future. The city has accomplished several key pieces involved in Practice 16: Urban Forests, from the GreenSteps framework.

The interviews with Park Rapids city staff made it evident that great value is placed on lakes and rivers in the area. Hubbard County and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources have implemented Shoreline Protection Ordinances in an effort to better protect those highly valued waters. The Shoreland Overlay District zoning ordinances involve Practice 19: Surface Water Quality from the GreenSteps framework.

The city is continuously working to improve their network of parks and trails. From these projects there are 6 parks and the Heartland Trail. Among the efforts to improve these parks and trails,

is the goal of connecting the parks and trails. This is incorporated into Best Practice 18: Parks and Trails from GreenSteps.

The city of Park Rapids is working to improve parks and trails, which coincides with the efforts to promote biking and walking. These efforts are being promoted in Park Rapids through programs such as Active Living and Safe Routes to School. These programs are a central part of the city's Comprehensive Land Use Plan. The programs incorporated into the Comprehensive Land Use Plan, are involved in Practice 12: Mobility Options and Practice 6: Comprehensive Plan and Implementation.

Current and Future Barriers

The city lacks staff capacity and this is a key barrier to their sustainability efforts. Furthermore, the city lacks the ability to access available grants. An additional barrier involves identifying those local champions who will invest time and energy into laying the groundwork for Park Rapids to become a GreenSteps city. There is also a lack of community support for sustainability efforts, due to the added short-term costs associated with implementing these practices.

CONCLUSION

There were several themes that were identified in this assessment. These themes apply not only to the cities in this assessment, but rural communities throughout Minnesota. All communities in this assessment placed highest priority on their parks and trails. Parks and trails provide a sense of environmental appreciation for community members and tourists. Development in this area also fits into the GreenSteps framework in a multitude of ways, including Practice 12: Mobility Options and Practice 18: Parks and Trails.

It's clear the communities assessed recognize the importance of sustainability issues and have incorporated them into long-term policies and initiatives. For example Bemidji and Park Rapids have included practices from GreenSteps in there Comprehensive Land Use process.

Common barriers also emerged with interviews in these communities. One common barrier was lack of staff capacity; this is a consequence of small city tax levies. This limits the amount of professional staff a city can afford. Furthermore leading to city administrators and city managers lacking necessary staff resources to implement additional projects and explore new initiatives.

An additional consequence of limited revenue requires cities to focus resources on essential services, thus they have limited funds available to advance additional projects and initiatives. In addition to those difficulties, lack of finances distorts the outlook on sustainable issues. The opportunities are framed as impact of short-term costs, rather than impact of long-term sustainability, due to these budget constraints.

A common barrier across these communities is lack of community support for sustainability initiatives. It's difficult for some individuals to justify the costs of sustainable initiatives when the long-

term benefits aren't immediately evident. Thus local champions are essential in gaining traction on issues and aiding in the education of other community members.

A common priority for every community assessed was a priority placed on parks, trails, and water quality protection. Aside from their ecological importance, Minnesota's lakes, trails, and parks are extremely important to the state's recreation and tourism industry, as well as to many local economies. This explains the priority that local communities have placed on protecting water quality and investing in green space. This assessment confirmed that these communities are committed to improving sustainability efforts, thus benefiting from their abundant opportunities from natural resources.

This assessment identified areas where improvement is needed to achieve future sustainable practices. Future initiatives will rely on expansion of city staff capacity and financial resources. A key to expanded financial resources is the availability of funding through grant opportunities. Future sustainability efforts will focus on communities and their residents' understanding the long-term benefits over the short-term costs.